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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Antognazza, M. R. (2017). Theory and Praxis in Leibniz's Theological Thought. In W. Li, & H. Rudolph (Eds.), *Leibniz im Lichte der Theologien* (pp. 35-57). (Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa; Vol. 40). Franz Steiner Verlag. <https://elibrary.steiner-verlag.de/book/99.105010/9783515114684>

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# Theory and Praxis in Leibniz's Theological Thought

By

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## Introduction

The importance of properly theological concerns in Leibniz's thought has long been underestimated.<sup>1</sup> A striking example is provided by the critical edition of Leibniz's writings and correspondence planned at the beginning of the twentieth-century Leibniz renaissance. In the catalogue of Leibniz's manuscripts compiled by Eduard Bodemann and published in 1889, the first, substantial group of manuscripts is labelled 'Theologie'.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in the Akademie Ausgabe there is no theological series. Alongside philosophy and mathematics, in the titles of the eight series we find listed politics, history, the natural sciences, technology, linguistics, and even medicine, but not theology.<sup>3</sup> The editorial decision to leave theology out

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Howard Hotson for his helpful comments on a draft version of this paper. My discussion is indebted to R. M. Adams's insightful studies of religion and theology in Leibniz, notably, "Justice, Happiness, and Perfection in Leibniz's City of God", in: Larry M. Jorgensen and Samuel Newlands (eds), *New Essays on Leibniz's Theodicy*, Oxford 2014, pp. 197-217; "Leibniz's Conception of Religion", in: Mark D. Gedney (ed.), *The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, vol. 7: Modern Philosophy, Philosophy Documentation Center 2000, pp. 57-70; "Leibniz's Examination of the Christian Religion", in: *Faith and Philosophy* 11/4 (1994), pp. 517-46. Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Eduard Bodemann, *Die Leibniz-Handschriften der Königlichen öffentlichen Bibliothek zu Hannover*, Hannover and Leipzig 1895, I: 'Theologie', pp. 1-25.

<sup>3</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, hrsg. von der Preußischen (später: Deutschen) Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Reihe I–VIII. Darmstadt, Leipzig, Berlin, 1923 --. Reihe I: *Allgemeiner, politischer und historischer Briefwechsel*; Reihe II: *Philosophischer Briefwechsel*; Reihe III: *Mathematischer, naturwissenschaftlicher und technischer Briefwechsel*; Reihe IV: *Politische Schriften*; Reihe V: *Historische und sprachwissenschaftliche Schriften*; Reihe VI: *Philosophische Schriften*; Reihe VII: *Mathematische Schriften*; Reihe VIII: *Naturwissenschaftliche, medizinische und technische Schriften*. The edition is known as Akademie Ausgabe.

of the main thematic structure of the critical edition offers one of the most compelling illustrations of the dominant historiographical paradigm of the era before the outbreak of the Great War, which linked inevitable progress with irresistible secularisation. Theology in Leibniz was seen as reducible either to metaphysics or to *Kirchenpolitik*, that is, to the church politics related to Leibniz's well known project of ecclesiastical reunification, which in turn was conceived as essentially instrumental to a broader political agenda of stability and pacification. In brief, when it came to theology, Leibniz was considered either a metaphysician or a political pragmatist. The metaphysician dealt with the classical debates of natural theology; the pragmatist dealt with revealed theology as a courtier who devoted needless attention to theological questions in order to please his patrons or, more sympathetically, to serve the political needs of his day: to keep the peace, re-establish a degree of ecclesiastical harmony, and thus prevent the re-occurrence of the horrors of the Thirty Years' War.<sup>4</sup> As a result of this historiography, although the role of natural theology has at least been acknowledged in the context of Leibniz's metaphysics and theodicy, the importance for Leibniz's thought of theological issues pertaining specifically to Christian revealed theology was persistently underplayed throughout virtually the entire twentieth century.

During the past twenty years, this situation has begun to change. As Fontenelle had already noted three hundred years ago, in his *Éloge* of Leibniz in 1717, Leibniz "was a theologian, not only as a philosopher or a metaphysician, but also in the strict sense".<sup>5</sup> Thanks not least to the great advances in the critical edition of previously unpublished and difficult to access texts, an increasing number of studies have drawn attention to the sheer mass and sophistication of Leibniz's writings on issues specific to Christian theology, and to their relevance to and impact on his philosophical views.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the "Preface" to Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*, 1st ed. Cambridge 1900, 2nd edn. London 1937, and, recently, the exuberant popular caricature of Leibniz by Matthew Stewart, *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza and the Fate of God in the Modern World*, New Haven 2005, rehearsing all the usual stereotypes.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle: "Éloge de M. Leibnitz", in: *Histoire de l'Académie Royale des sciences. Année 1716*, Paris 1718, pp. 94–128. Also in Dutens I, xix–liii (here p. xliii).

<sup>6</sup> For examples of recent studies see below the section on Leibniz's theoretical engagement with revealed theology.

In the light of this recent scholarship, this paper will re-assess the place of theology in Leibniz's thought focusing on the relationship between theory and praxis. Fontenelle had already seen that Leibniz the metaphysician did not capture the whole of Leibniz the theologian. But can one nevertheless conclude, in line with the thematic structure of the Akademie Ausgabe, that anything over and above metaphysics is adequately captured by Leibniz's political agenda? It is beyond dispute that Leibniz's theological views were shaped by his political context; but the question to be posed here is whether this political dimension justifies the reduction of Leibniz's engagement with Christian theology to mere *Kirchenpolitik*. In a number of ways, Leibniz's approach to revealed theology was profoundly pragmatic. But is this pragmatism irreducibly political? Or did it rest, in turn, on an emphasis on praxis which was theological?

In answering these questions, this paper takes as its point of departure a general conclusion that I have tried to establish in extenso in previous work, namely that Leibniz's key formulations of his overarching plan for the reform and advancement of all the sciences, from his youthful *Demonstrationum Catholicarum Conspectus* (1668-69) onward, are devoted to a set of objectives which is both shaped by broadly theological concerns and ultimately practical.<sup>7</sup> Against this backdrop, the discussion will then turn to an exploration of how Leibniz thought of theology as such. On the basis, once again, of my previous work and of a wave of recent research on Leibniz's theological writings, I will argue that Leibniz was committed to the elaboration of a robust Christian dogmatic which was rationally defensible, and that this commitment resulted in a genuine engagement with Christian theology which took very seriously its theoretical dogmatic content. The key additional thesis to be argued for in this paper is that this theoretical engagement was in the service of a science which he conceived as ultimately practical. For Leibniz, the ultimate aim of theology was to lead to the love of God above all things and, in so doing, to salvation and eternal happiness. It is in the light of this practical end that his theological pragmatism should be evaluated. When this is done, it becomes apparent that, beneath Leibniz's efforts at theological reconciliation in the context of his *Kirchenpolitik*, there lies a deeper, fundamental and properly theological emphasis on praxis, grounded in Leibniz's epistemology and driven by his conception of salvation as ultimately dependent on a practical attitude – the love of God above of things.

The paper will conclude that this is very much in line with the whole thrust of Leibniz's intellectual programme as expressed in the over-arching plans discussed in the first

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<sup>7</sup> See my *Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography*, Cambridge – New York 2009.

section. These plans too were driven by a practical end: the promotion of the common good and of human happiness as the celebration of the glory of God in his creation. Leibniz's writings on revealed as well as natural theology were therefore composed as part of an overarching set of purposes with a broadly theological inspiration and an ultimately practical aim. In conclusion, it will also be stressed that the end of happiness – whether worldly or eternal -- should not be regarded as competing with Leibniz's theoretical endeavours – whether in the sciences or in theology -- but as directly supported by them.

The theological inspiration and practical aim of Leibniz's all-embracing programme

Around 1668-9, a twenty-two-year old Leibniz penned the plan of an all-encompassing intellectual programme which was to guide, to one extent or another, his entire intellectual journey. Theology, both in the form of natural theology and in the form of revealed theology, was at the heart of this youthful formulation of his life-long plan. Already carefully divided into parts and chapters, Leibniz's plan foresaw the "Demonstration of God's existence" (part 1); the "Demonstration of the Immortality and Incorporeity of the Soul" (part 2); the "Demonstration of the Possibility of the Mysteries of the Christian Faith" (part 3); and the "Demonstration of the Authority of the Catholic Church" and "of the Authority of Scripture" (part 4).<sup>8</sup> In order to carry out successfully these catholic (that is, universal) demonstrations, Leibniz envisaged the need for a comprehensive reform and development of the "elements of philosophy". As *prolegomena* to the demonstrations proper, the young man therefore took upon himself to rewrite, in due course, the first principles of metaphysics (*de Ente*), of logic (*de Mente*), of mathematics (*de Spatio*), of physics (*de Corpore*), and of ethics and politics or "practical philosophy" (*de Civitate*). In other words, this plan as a whole represented the core of a systematic encyclopaedia of the sciences aimed at supporting the key tenets of natural and revealed theology. It embodied both a comprehensive theoretical project of reform and development of the sciences, and an equally ambitious practical project of political and ecclesiastical reconciliation.

In a letter of the autumn 1679, having found in Johann Friedrich of Hanover a sympathetic patron, Leibniz presented to the duke his over-arching plan of *Demonstrationes*

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<sup>8</sup> *Demonstrationum Catholicarum Conspectus*, 1668-9\* (A VI, 1, N. 14). A date accompanied by an asterisk indicates the period from which the text probably dates.

*Catholicae* as “a work of the greatest importance”.<sup>9</sup> This plan, Leibniz explained, embraced the whole of natural and revealed theology, including the demonstrations of the existence of God and of the immortality and incorporeity of the soul on the one hand,<sup>10</sup> and the defence of the mysteries of the Christian religion against the charge of absurdity on the other.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it intended to show the authority of what Leibniz regarded as the two complementary sources of theological truth: Scripture and the catholic (that is, ‘universal’) church.<sup>12</sup> Most importantly, Leibniz clarified for the duke why these theological demonstrations had to be prepared by an inquiry into the foundations of the entire encyclopaedia of sciences, notably logic, metaphysics, physics, ethics, politics, and mathematics. First of all, it would not be sufficient merely to develop traditional logic. For the kind of demonstrations envisaged by Leibniz in the part of his plan devoted to the defence of the Christian mysteries, a new branch of logic capable of “weighing” probabilities was required.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, a formal, universal language or *characteristica universalis* was urgently needed for solving religious controversies and propagating the Christian religion through the work of missionaries.<sup>14</sup> In turn, a development of metaphysics or *scientia de ente* was essential in order to reach true notions of “God, the soul, person, substance, and accident”,<sup>15</sup> all of them fundamental for the planned demonstrations of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, for the defence of mysteries such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the resurrection, and for the explanation of the Eucharist.

A new doctrine of mind or *elementa de mente*, and a new doctrine of bodies (physics or the *elementa de corpore*), were also needed especially for the demonstrations of the existence of God, of the immortality and incorporeity of the soul, and of the possibility of the

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<sup>9</sup> A II, 1, 488 and A I, 2, 225.

<sup>10</sup> See A II, 1, 488; A I, 2, 225; and parts I and II of the *Demonstrationum Catholicarum Conspectus* (A VI, 1, 494-5).

<sup>11</sup> See A II, 1, 488; A I, 2, 225; part III of the *Demonstrationum Catholicarum Conspectus* (A VI, 1, 495-9).

<sup>12</sup> See part IV of the *Demonstrationum Catholicarum Conspectus* (A VI, 1, 499-500) and A II, 1, 488-9; A I, 2, 225.

<sup>13</sup> A I, 2, 225 and A II, 1, 489.

<sup>14</sup> A II, 1, 490-91 and A I, 2, 226-7.

<sup>15</sup> A II, 1, 489 and A I, 2, 225.

resurrection of bodies.<sup>16</sup> Finally, it was necessary to demonstrate “the true ethics and politics” in order to know what “justice, justification, freedom, pleasure, beatitude, beatifical vision” are, and how to reach the “happiness of the human kind also down here and in this life.”<sup>17</sup> It was with the aim of forging the rigorous way of thinking required by all these demonstrations, Leibniz concluded, that he had spent so much time studying mathematics in Paris. By his own lights, his interest in mathematics was not to be seen as an end in itself but as aimed in the last instance at the realisation of his grand plan.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, one way to read Leibniz’s theoretical and practical endeavours in much of his life is as a tenacious attempt to realize his titanic youthful project.<sup>19</sup> Later formulations softened the early explicit emphasis on Christian theology while maintaining the fundamentally theological orientation of the plan. In 1688, for example, in the extensive notes prepared for an audience with the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I, Leibniz introduced his wide-ranging proposals for political, administrative, economic, and social reform with the claim that the development and application of science was the activity which above all other worldly activities “promotes the glory of God, unveils his power and wisdom, and ignites human beings with the love of God” while fostering their welfare and temporal happiness. From the lack of temporal happiness, Leibniz went on to say, originates in fact disorder and lack of virtue which in turn produce not only temporal but eternal unhappiness.<sup>20</sup>

In the mid-1690s, again, in a *Mémoire pour des Personnes éclairées et de bonne intention* (*Memoir for Enlightened Persons of Good Intention*) Leibniz offered one of the

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<sup>16</sup> See the *Prolegomena* to the *Demonstrationum Catholicarum Conspectus* (A VI, 1, 494) and the presentation of the plan to the duke (A II, 1, 226 and A I, 2, 489).

<sup>17</sup> A I, 2, 226; A II, 1, 489.

<sup>18</sup> A II, 1, 490; A I, 2, 226. See also Leibniz’s *Selbstschilderung* for Duke Johann Friedrich; Autumn 1679\*, A II, 1, 492–3.

<sup>19</sup> See Heinrich Schepers, “*Demonstrationes Catholicae*: Leibniz’s großer Plan; ein rationales Friedensprojekt für Europa”, in: Friedrich Beiderbeck and Stephan Waldhoff (eds.), *Pluralität der Perspektiven und Einheit der Wahrheit im Werk von G. W. Leibniz*, Berlin 2011, pp. 3-15; Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation: Reason and Revelation in the Seventeenth Century*, New Haven 2007, pp. 3-15 (first published as *Trinità e Incarnazione: Il rapporto tra filosofia e teologia rivelata nel pensiero di Leibniz*, Milan 1999); Antognazza: *Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography*, esp. pp. 90-123.

<sup>20</sup> A IV, 4, 21. See also A IV, 4 N. 1-11 and A I, 5 N. 149.

most rounded summaries of the vision guiding his intellectual life. The ultimate aim of all the various sciences and disciplines listed in the *Mémoire* was identified in the contribution “to the glory of God, or (what is the same thing) to the common good”. According to Leibniz, “the great principle of metaphysics as well as of morality” was that the world is a universal monarchy of spirits governed by God. “This being established,” Leibniz continued,

every enlightened person must judge that the true means of guaranteeing forever his own individual happiness is to seek his satisfaction in occupations which tend toward the general good; for the love of God, above all, and the necessary enlightenment, will not be denied to a mind which is animated in this way, God never refusing his grace to those who seek it with a good heart. Now, this general good, in so far as we can contribute to it, is the advancement toward perfection of men, as much as by enlightening them so that they can know the marvels of the sovereign substance, as by helping them to remove the obstacles which stop the progress of our enlightenment.<sup>21</sup>

There followed a sweeping overview of all the sciences to be developed in order to advance human happiness and perfection – from logic to medicine and the natural sciences, to the study of human history including “the universal history of time, the geography of places, the recovery of antiquities ... the knowledge of languages and what is called philology”, and so on.

Approaching the end of his life, Leibniz continued to maintain that his programme as a whole was intended to celebrate God’s glory through the improvement of the human condition, for which the advancement of the sciences was the key instrument. In a letter addressed to Peter the Great on 16 January 1712, he explained to the Czar:

Although I have very frequently been employed in public affairs and also in the judiciary system and am consulted on such matters by great princes on an ongoing basis, I nevertheless regard the arts and sciences as a higher calling, since through them the glory of God and the best interests of the whole of human race is continuously promoted. For in the sciences and the knowledge of nature and art, the wonder of God,

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<sup>21</sup> See Klopp X, 7–21 (esp. pp. 9–21); trans. by Patrick Riley in G. W. Leibniz, *Political Writings*, 2nd ed. Cambridge 1988, pp. 103–10 (see esp. pp. 105–10) (here p. 105).



his power, wisdom, and goodness are especially manifest; and the arts and sciences are also the true treasury of the human race, through which art masters nature.<sup>22</sup>

In short, Leibniz's own formula for pulling together the numerous threads of his extraordinary life's work reveals a broadly theological inspiration. In a text of 1671, ending with a set of social and economic reform proposals in fields as disparate as medicine and coinage, we read: "to practice charity, the love of God above all, [...] is in fact to love the common good (*bonum publicum*) and universal harmony; or, which is the same thing, the glory of God."<sup>23</sup> And as he wrote to Duke Johann Friedrich of Hanover in 1678 "all these things are connected and have to be directed to the same aim, which is the glory of God and the advancement of the public good by means of useful works and beautiful discoveries."<sup>24</sup> In a way not uncommon to other architects of early modern science, Leibniz conceived of the development of science as a celebration of the glory of God in his creation due to the role played by science in the improvement of the human condition – that is to say, the improvement of the rational creatures which crowned creation through their ability to enter into society with God.

The reference to God and the divine order as the framework in which Leibniz's overarching intellectual programme is situated seems therefore beyond doubt. From these broadly theological concerns we turn now to a more specific investigation of his engagement with theology *strictu sensu*.

### Theology and theory: the engagement with Christian orthodoxy

The breadth and depth of Leibniz's theoretical engagement with theological matters is not difficult to show. Most obviously, theological issues can be found at the very heart of his metaphysical system, such as the concept of God and of his attributes, with their immediate

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<sup>22</sup> In Woldemar Guerrier, *Leibniz in seinen Beziehungen zu Russland und Peter dem Grossen*. St. Petersburg and Leipzig 1873, N. 143, pp. 206-8.

<sup>23</sup> A IV, 1, 532. Trans. by Stephan Waldhoff in "Political, administrative, economic, and social reform proposals", in: Maria Rosa Antognazza (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Leibniz*, Oxford – New York, forthcoming.

<sup>24</sup> A I, 2, 111.

relevance for Leibniz's theodicy.<sup>25</sup> More specifically linked to the tradition of natural theology is Leibniz's highly original and fairly well known treatment of a priori and a posteriori arguments for the existence of God.<sup>26</sup> In brief, the fact that arguments relating to natural theology played an integral role in Leibniz's thought has been acknowledged for some time.

On the other hand, his theoretical engagement with issues of revealed theology is much less well known. Yet Leibniz wrote extensively on key doctrines of the Christian revelation such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist, Predestination, and (to a lesser extent) the Resurrection.<sup>27</sup> On these doctrines he brought to bear the full weight of a formidable theological tradition of the highest theoretical sophistication, with which he was fully conversant. In this sphere of revealed theology, the truth of Fontenelle's words becomes most apparent, namely that Leibniz also engaged with theology in the strict sense of the term and not merely as an aspect of metaphysics. It also becomes clear that a reduction of these texts to metaphysical or (at the other end of the spectrum) political interests does not do justice to their content. The issues discussed are of course closely linked to metaphysical or political concerns but this does not detract from their properly theological depth any more than the fact that Leibniz's logic is linked to his metaphysics detracts from the originality of his logic per se. Rather, this is another case of the connection of everything with everything in Leibniz's system of thought, so that a text is fully illuminated only if taken in its holistic context.

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<sup>25</sup> See especially the second part of Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*. New York and Oxford 1994; Donald Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature*, Cambridge 1995; Gaston Grua, *Jurisprudence universelle et Théodicée selon Leibniz*, Paris 1953.

<sup>26</sup> See especially David Blumenfeld, "Leibniz's Ontological and Cosmological Arguments", in: Nicholas Jolley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 353-81; Mogens Laerke, "Leibniz's Cosmological Argument for the Existence of God", in: *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 93 (2011), pp. 58-84; Brandon C. Look, "Leibniz's Arguments for the Existence of God", in: Antognazza (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Leibniz*, forthcoming.

<sup>27</sup> Amongst recent contributions see for instance Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation* and Irena Backus, *Leibniz Protestant Theologian*, Oxford – New York 2014.

It is striking that with regard to central doctrines of Christian theology such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, Leibniz did not adopt a minimalist dogmatic attitude in the service of his irenicism and ecumenism. For instance, he did not embrace the controversial but (amongst protestants) well established doctrine of a distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith according to which all fundamental articles of faith are to be found *in terminis* in Scripture, and only belief in such fundamental articles is required for salvation.<sup>28</sup> This doctrine had been proposed in protestant circles (notably by the Dutch Remonstrants), and had been embraced by illustrious thinkers of the calibre of Hugo Grotius and John Locke, as a way to end bloody religious confrontations amongst Christians. Distinctive doctrines of the Christian revelation, such as the divinity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, were typically underplayed or passed over in silence altogether by those pointing to *sola Scriptura* as the explicit source of all articles of faith necessary and sufficient to salvation.<sup>29</sup> Leibniz, however, acknowledged that, even on fundamental issues with a bearing on salvation, a correct interpretation of Scripture requires the mediation of the truly universal Christian tradition.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in his own theological writings, far from marginalizing controversial dogmas (such as, above all, the Trinity), in favour of the promotion of a purely rational natural religion, Leibniz proposed his own distinctive and remarkably sophisticated doctrines ‘De Deo Trino’ and ‘De Persona Christi’, in which he sided with certain specific theological positions while firmly opposing others.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Maria Rosa Antognazza, “Leibniz and Religious Toleration: the Correspondence with Paul Pellisson-Fontanier”, in: *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76/4 (2002), pp. 605-612 and Maria Rosa Antognazza, “Leibniz’s doctrine of toleration: philosophical, theological and pragmatic reasons”, in: J. Parkin and T. Stanton (eds), *Natural Law and Toleration in the Early Enlightenment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, pp. 155-156.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Hugo Grotius, *De Veritate Religionis Christianae*, Leiden and Paris 1627; John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as delivered in the Scriptures*, London 1695. On Grotius see my “Introduction”, in: Hugo Grotius, *The Truth of the Christian Religion*, Indianapolis 2012, pp. xv-xviii.

<sup>30</sup> On this issue see especially ch. 6 “*Sola Scriptura?* The Interpretation of Scriptures and the Authority of Tradition”, in: Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, pp. 74-76.

<sup>31</sup> See ch. 7 “*On the Triune God and On the Person of Christ*”, in: Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, pp. 77-88.

For instance, with regard to his Christology, Leibniz was committed to rejecting doctrines which in his view imply contradiction, such as the *communicatio idiomatum* (that is, the communication of properties between the human and divine nature of Christ) despite the fact that this doctrine was widely accepted in Lutheran circles in the form of Ubiquitism.<sup>32</sup> This is, in my view, evidence that Leibniz, as a Christian theologian, was committed to the task of developing a robust and rationally defensible Christian dogmatic free of absurdities in the technical sense of not implying contraction. As any other theologian who takes the theoretical dogmatic content of Christianity seriously, Leibniz was very far from regarding Christian doctrines on the nature of God as poetical or mythological expressions, in which anything goes as long as one is clear that they have no truth content beyond conveying in vivid and imaginative language what human reason is capable to know on its own about God. That is, for Leibniz the Bible was not some mythological epic that despite its centrality to Western culture was still in the same category as the *Uranias* to which he devoted time and effort at the end of his life.<sup>33</sup> Christian dogmatic had for him a genuine claim to expressing truths above human reason while at the same time still needing to be rationally defensible.

In my view, Leibniz intended this rational defensibility in three main ways: there must be philological and historical support for the authenticity of the texts and the antiquity of the tradition; it must be possible to defend any given Christian doctrine from the charge of contradiction; and it must be possible to give a plausible explanation of how such doctrine could be true. This explanation, however, would not amount to a demonstration of truth but, as it were, to a provisional and incomplete explanatory hypothesis which allows for competing explanatory hypotheses.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, esp. pp. 14, 77, 86-88, 181 note 105, 182 note 107; and Maria Rosa Antognazza, “Leibniz’s theory of substance and his metaphysics of the Incarnation”, in: Paul Lodge and T.W.C. Stoneham (eds), *Locke and Leibniz on Substance and Identity*, Abingdon – New York, forthcoming.

<sup>33</sup> See Antognazza, *Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 541-542.

<sup>34</sup> One could see here an interesting parallel with Aquinas’s attitude toward the Augustinian theory of divine illumination. In the *Q. d. de spiritualibus creaturis* (art. 10 ad octavum), Aquinas distances himself from the Augustinian-Platonic version of the theory, siding instead with what he regards as Aristotle’s view. Aquinas concludes, however, that it does not matter greatly [*non multum autem refert*] whether one follows one or the other theory – not because

This last point introduces the next aspect of Leibniz's engagement with theology which I would like to explore, namely the ultimately practical end of theology according to Leibniz.

### Theology and praxis: the analogy with jurisprudence

One way of appreciating Leibniz's conception of the practical end of theology is via the strong analogy between theology and jurisprudence which he maintained from his youth. In the years in which he was awarded his Doctorate in Law from the University of Altdorf (November 1666), the young jurist wrote in the *Nova Methodus Discendae Docendaeque Jurisprudentia* (1667): "Theology is a certain kind of Jurisprudence taken generally; it concerns in fact the Right and Laws [agit enim de Jure et Legibus] which obtain in the Republic or, rather, the reign of God over human beings".<sup>35</sup> The analogy continues with the distinction in both theology and jurisprudence of a natural part, of which the principle is reason (grounding, respectively, natural theology and natural law), and a positive part, of which the principle is the authority of a text ("Scripturam seu librum", grounding respectively divine positive law and human positive law).<sup>36</sup>

In brief, Leibniz proposed a framework in which theology was conceived as the jurisprudence regulating the association of God with "all minds [esprits], that is substances capable of relations or society with God" in the universal republic headed by God as its

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they are philosophically similar, but because their difference does not have an impact on any truth of faith. (See Sofia Vanni Rovighi, *Introduzione a Tommaso D'Aquino*, Roma – Bari 1981, pp. 106-108). *Mutando mutandis*, as long as there is no proven inconsistency, for Leibniz it may well not matter for a rationally justified belief which philosophical theory one follows in providing a plausible explanation of the meaning of a mystery.

<sup>35</sup> *Nova Methodus Discendae Docendaeque Jurisprudentia* (A VI, 1, 294); see also *Dissertatio de Arte Combinatoria* of 1666 (A VI, 1, 168).

<sup>36</sup> *Nova Methodus Discendae Docendaeque Jurisprudentia* (A VI, 1, 294): "Utraque enim duplex principium habet, partim rationem, hinc Theologia Jurisprudentiaque naturalis ... partim Scripturam seu librum quendam Authenticum Leges positivas, illic Divinas, hinc Humanas continentem."

monarch.<sup>37</sup> In the case of natural theology, one could count on the absolute certainty of rational demonstration, but in the case of positive or revealed theology, such certainty as human beings can attain is only moral -- that is, a certainty based on the weight of reasons “verifying facts” like the authenticity of the text, the authority and trustworthiness of its author, and so on, rather than on the absolute necessity of logic.

In other texts, Leibniz pointed again to jurisprudence as the field in which most progress had been made in this art of “weighting the strength of reasons” rather than counting them – an art, Leibniz claimed, still in its infancy but of key importance “in the most serious and important matters of life, which regard justice, the tranquillity and wellbeing of the state, the health of human beings, and religion itself.”<sup>38</sup> In these areas -- including religion and most fields which have a direct impact on “matters of life” -- we typically lack the absolute certainty given by strict rational demonstrations and must instead rely on processes of rational decision-making guiding our action in uncertain situations.<sup>39</sup> According to Leibniz, the most promising way forward in these cases is often to adopt strategies inspired by the practice of jurisprudence.

An illuminating example is provided by the way in which Leibniz proposed to defend the mysteries of the Christian religion, that is, traditional Christian doctrines which he acknowledged as belonging to a class of truths above human reason, and therefore beyond the realm of demonstration. Drawing attention to the notion of ‘presumption of truth’ employed by jurists, Leibniz pointed out that the burden of proof is on those who attack traditional Christian doctrines rather than on their defenders. Like the defendants in a law court, Christian believers can appeal to a presumption of truth of their beliefs until the opposite is

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<sup>37</sup> *Mémoire pour des Personnes éclairées* (mid 1690s) (trans. by Riley in Leibniz, *Political Writings*, p. 105). See also Grua 241: “Theology is a sort of divine jurisprudence, explicating the legal principles [*jura*] of our association with God” (trans. by R. M. Adams).

<sup>38</sup> Leibniz to Thomas Burnett of Kemney, 11 February 1697 (A I, 13, 555). As we have seen, Leibniz advocated from early on the necessity of developing a new part of logic able to weight reasons as of great importance to revealed theology. See his letter to Duke Johann Friedrich of autumn 1679 (A I, 2, 225 and A II, 1, 489).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Markku Roinila, *Leibniz on Rational Decision Making*, Helsinki 2007 and Marcelo Dascal (ed.), *Leibniz: What Kind of Rationalist*, Berlin 2008.

proved. In other words, they are rationally justified in holding traditional doctrines as true until their impossibility (and therefore irrationality) is proved.<sup>40</sup>

A few preliminary conclusions can be drawn from this brief account. By suggesting a conception of theology as the jurisprudence regulating the association between God and humankind, Leibniz is signalling that theology is ultimately practical: its ultimate purpose is to regulate our life in the City of God, providing the framework of the rightfulness or justice of our actions in relation to God and our fellow citizens. As mentioned above, Leibniz embraces and upholds the traditional distinction between “natural” and “revealed” theology, corresponding respectively to the “natural” and “positive” law of the City of God. This is important. First of all, it confirms that the framework of justice regulating the relationship of God with rational creatures is not arbitrary but relies on something analogous to “natural law”. That is, it is grounded on the nature of God himself as it can be discovered rationally through natural theology and its investigations of the existence and attributes of God. Secondly, Leibniz also acknowledges the role of the will of God as expressed in the revealed part of theology. Just as positive laws are the result of the will of the legislators, the justice of which is ultimately grounded in the agreement of such positive laws with natural law, so revealed theology expounds the ways in which God willed to rescue and reshape his relationship with humankind after sin, crucially through the Incarnation.<sup>41</sup> The latter truth is not discoverable or provable by human reason; it is merely morally certain, hence the need to turn, once again, to the practices of jurisprudence to defend this and other doctrines of revealed theology.

Leibniz’s analogy between natural and revealed theology, on the one hand, and natural and positive law, on the other, is grounded in his epistemology, with its distinction between absolute and moral certainty. The next step in our argument is to appreciate how this distinction ultimately leads to Leibniz’s remarkably pragmatic stance regarding the doctrines of the Christian revelation.

#### Absolute certainty and moral certainty

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Maria Rosa Antognazza, “The Defence of the Mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation: an Example of Leibniz’s ‘Other’ Reason”, in: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 9/2 (2001), pp. 283-309.

<sup>41</sup> See Antognazza, *Leibniz and the Trinity and the Incarnation*, esp. pp. 83-84.

Leibniz sharply distinguished between absolute and moral certainty both in theology and in philosophy. To begin with the former, in the letter to Duke Johann Friedrich of autumn 1679 in which his all-embracing project of the *Demonstrationes Catholicae* was presented, Leibniz explained:

It should contain three sections: The *first section* is to demonstrate the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and all natural theology; since in effect I have attained surprising demonstrations. The second section should be about the Christian religion, or revealed Theology; in it I would like to demonstrate the possibility of our mysteries of the faith and solve all the difficulties raised by those who claim to show there are absurdities and contradictions in the Trinity, in the Incarnation, in the Eucharist, and in the resurrection of bodies. For the proofs of the Christian religion are only moral, because it is not possible to give others in matters of fact; now all the proofs that carry only a moral certitude can be overturned by stronger contrary proofs, and therefore one must also answer the objections to satisfy oneself entirely, since a single proven impossibility in our mysteries would capsize the whole boat.<sup>42</sup>

As hinted above, the distinction between absolute or metaphysical certainty and moral certainty corresponds in theology to the distinction between natural and revealed theology. Whereas the former enjoys the absolute certainty given by strict demonstration of such truths as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, the latter cannot but rely on moral certainty, that is, crucially, on the kind of certainty which is sufficient to rationally ground our action. Moral certainty (to use Leibniz's beautiful metaphor) can be capsized by absolute certainty: what we reasonably held to be true on the basis of moral certainty can in principle be demonstrated to be false when a charge of inconsistency is proved with metaphysical certainty. However, as long as this does not happen, it is rational to act (and indeed we should act) on grounds of moral certainty. Recalling what was said above on the use of juridical practices to tackle issues which are theoretically uncertain, the distinction between moral and absolute certainty aligns with the practice of holding something as true until the opposite is proved.

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<sup>42</sup> A II, 1, 488; see also A I, 2, 225.



Some twenty years later Leibniz echoed these views in a letter of February 1697 to Thomas Burnet, where he explicitly extended the distinction between absolute and moral certainty to philosophy and linked moral certainty to the practical sphere:

Theological truths and inferences are of two species; some have a metaphysical certainty and others have a moral certainty. ... Philosophy has two parts, the theoretical and the practical. Theoretical Philosophy is founded on true analysis, of which the Mathematicians give examples, but which ought also to be applied to Metaphysics and to natural theology, in giving definitions and solid axioms. But practical Philosophy is founded on the true Topics or Dialectics – that is to say, on the art of estimating the degrees of proofs, which is not yet found among authors who are Logicians, but of which the Jurists have given examples that are not to be despised and that can serve as a beginning for forming a science of proofs, suitable for verifying facts and for giving the meaning of texts.<sup>43</sup>

But what, one might still wonder, does holding as true highly theoretical doctrines of revealed theology (such as the Trinitarian nature of God or the real presence of the body of Christ in the Eucharist) have to do with praxis? To answer this question, we need to turn to Leibniz's notion of confused cognition, and to its links with the notion of "safety" and with Leibniz's doctrine of salvation.

### Confused cognition

In an early text, completely built on the analogy between theology and jurisprudence,<sup>44</sup> Leibniz claimed that, in order to believe in the Christian mysteries,

it is necessary that the intellect should not fall nakedly over the words, like a parrot, but that some sense should appear before it, albeit a general and confused one, and almost disjunctive, as the country fellow, or other common man, has of nearly all theoretical

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<sup>43</sup> GP III, 193-4; trans. by R. M. Adams.

<sup>44</sup> *Commentatiuncula de Judice Controversiarum*, 1669-1679\*; A VI, 1, N. 22. The inquiry after the last instance of judgment in controversial issues (both religious and secular) was a *locus communis* in the controversist literature of the time.

things. ... so this faith will be disjunctive, inclining nevertheless to one side. And this is in fact, if you pay attention, what many Christians do in practice [ita fides ista erit disjunctiva, inclinans tamen in unam partem. Et hoc revera si attendas in praxi plerique Christiani faciunt].<sup>45</sup>

After noting that this is a kind of “blind thinking [cogitationem caecam]” on which not only common people but also philosophers routinely rely when using words such as “matter”, “form”, “cause”, Leibniz concluded:

To anyone who maintains that a distinct cognition of the meaning of the mysteries of faith is necessary to Salvation, it will be demonstrated by me that hardly the thousandth of Christians ... ever have had it. And as a consequence, it suffices for Salvation to hold onto the formula expressed in the Holy Scripture, with a confused cognition of the meaning by the intellect, and with a kind of disjunctive assent or belief.<sup>46</sup>

In my view, these passages are representative of Leibniz’s life-long attitude toward religious doctrines which fall outside the sphere of demonstrability, and therefore outside the sphere of absolute certainty. According to him, at least a confused cognition of the meaning of these doctrines is necessary for belief because the object of faith is not the words but the meaning of the words.<sup>47</sup> Crucially, however, provided there is no demonstrated contradiction, such confused and “disjunctive” cognition is also *sufficient* for a *prima facie* rationally justified belief.<sup>48</sup> In other word, although, on the one hand, one cannot believe in the words of the Last

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<sup>45</sup> *Commentatiuncula de Judice controversiarum*, A VI, 1, 550–551.

<sup>46</sup> *Commentatiuncula de Judice controversiarum*; A VI, 1, 552.

<sup>47</sup> *Commentatiuncula de Judice controversiarum* (A VI, 1, 550): “faith regards the meaning, not the words; therefore it is not sufficient for us to believe that whoever said that ‘This is my body’ was saying the truth, unless we also know what he said. For indeed we do not know what he said if we keep only to the words, ignoring their force and power.”

<sup>48</sup> *Commentatiuncula de Judice controversiarum* (A VI, 1, 550): “It is not always necessary for faith to know what sense of the words is true, as long as we understand it”. We find basically the same position in 1710 the *Theodicy* (§ 54 of the “Preliminary Discourse”; GP, VI, 80): “It is not necessary to require always what I call *adequate notions*, which contain nothing that has not been explained, since even sensible qualities such as heat, light,

Supper, “This is my body”, unless one has some confuse grasp of what these words mean,<sup>49</sup> on the other hand, it does not matter whether the sense in which these words are taken corresponds to their true meaning as long as belief in this or that specific sense of the words has no practical consequences and, therefore, no impact on salvation:

it is not always necessary for faith to know what sense of the words is true as long as we understand it, nor do we positively reject it, but rather leave it in doubt even though we might be inclined toward some other [sense]. Indeed, it suffices that we believe in the first place that whatever is contained in the meanings is true, and this first and foremost in the mysteries in which the practice does not change, whatever the meaning may finally be.<sup>50</sup>

I will come back later to the issue of the kind of soteriology unveiled by this stand. For now it suffices to note that, for instance, Leibniz devoted a remarkable amount of intellectual energy throughout his life to developing a sophisticated Eucharistic theology. Amongst his various attempts and what we might call intellectual experiments, arguably the most felicitous is a version of the doctrine which drew on his philosophical account of force and substance in order to propose an explanation capacious enough to accommodate both Catholic transubstantiation and Lutheran real presence while not being offensive to Calvinist views.<sup>51</sup> Developed as it was in the context of the negotiations between Lutherans and

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sweetness, do not supply us with such notions. So we agree that the mysteries receive an explanation, but this explanation is imperfect. It suffices that we have some analogical understanding of a mystery, such as the Trinity or the Incarnation, so that in receiving them we do not pronounce words entirely devoid of meaning.”

<sup>49</sup> See A VI, 1, 550. It should be emphasized that confused cognition is far from being limited to the mysteries of revealed religion. As is already clear from the passages quoted above, Leibniz points out that it extends also to physical and metaphysical notions, and to the way in which the layman grasps complex mathematical concepts.

<sup>50</sup> *Commentatiuncula de Iudice controversiarum*; A VI, 1, 550-551.

<sup>51</sup> On Leibniz’s reflections on the Eucharist see Adams, *Leibniz*, esp. pp. 349-360 and 389-393; Brandon C. Look and Donald Rutherford, “Introduction”, in: *The Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence*, New Haven and London 2007, pp. lvii-lxxii; Irena Backus, “Leibniz’s concept of substance and his reception of John Calvin’s doctrine of the Eucharist”, *British*

Calvinists, there is no doubt that Leibniz regarded as very important the possibility of reaching a theoretical understanding of this doctrine which could be intellectually satisfactory, theologically orthodox, and politically apt to remove one of the major stumbling blocks on the road to ecclesiastical reunification. Yet, as far as I can see, he continued to regard this proposal, as well as other theological theories, as acceptable explanatory hypotheses which did no more (but also no less) than contributing to the necessary task of providing a plausible sense to Christian doctrines. In other words, these theories could not claim to be true but only to be *possible*.

I do not mean to underplay the fundamental importance for Leibniz of such a claim to possibility, since any proven impossibility would be equivalent to proving the falsity of an allegedly revealed doctrine. For present purposes, however, I merely wish to draw attention to this approach, grounded in his epistemological notions of confused cognition and moral certainty, as the underpinning of Leibniz's strikingly pragmatic attitude when it comes to what is *rational* to hold as true in matters in which a great deal is at stake and absolute certainty is not available.

#### Probability and safety

In the *Commentatiuncula de Iudice Controversiarum*, this strongly pragmatic thrust of Leibniz's attitude toward controversial issues of revealed theology comes fully to the fore. A conflict between Sacred Text and reason arises, Leibniz explained, when the meaning of the text is unclear and reason cannot reach certainty. It seems clear to me that Leibniz is speaking here of the strong brand of rational certainty, that is, of the absolute certainty which is reached, for instance, in the case of a demonstrated impossibility. When there is no absolute rational certainty, but the *probable* meaning of the text is *improbable* according to reason, should we interpret the text in the light of what is probable according to reason or should we hold on to the text's more literal meaning?<sup>52</sup>

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*Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19/5 (2011), pp. 617-633; Backus, *Leibniz: Protestant Theologian*, Part 1.

<sup>52</sup> A VI, 1, 552–553: “When the meaning of a text is doubtful, likewise when reason can determine nothing certain, as is the case in things of fact, and a conflict arises between the text and reason, it is indeed not absolute, but probable, in this way: The real presence of the body of Christ, likewise the Trinity in GOD, is probable according to the text (for from the

Leibniz tackled in particular the issue of the resurrection of bodies, asking whether priority should be given to Scripture, affirming it, or to reason, pointing to the intrinsic improbability of such a thing happening. Leibniz is clear: if there are historical and philological reasons strong enough to support the claim to authenticity of the text and the antiquity of the tradition, priority should be given to the text, provided that the doctrine does not involve any proven contradiction (“*dummodo possibilis* [as long as it is possible]”). The credit given to the words of the text, despite their improbability according to reason, rests on the peculiar characteristics of “the One who has promised.”

Leibniz proposed the example of two men—Titius, rich and just, and Caius, poor and a born liar—who both promise a large sum of money. Although it is intrinsically improbable that anyone would give such a large sum of money to another person, Titius’s words (uttered, moreover, under oath) are worthy of trust, considering his reputation as a just man and the fact that he is both able and willing to keep his promise. On the contrary, it is not only improbable but actually impossible that Caius should keep his promise (supposing that he does not have, and in the future will not have, so much money). One should therefore not trust in his words, unless one takes them metaphorically.<sup>53</sup> Leibniz concluded:

Let us transfer this to God. God is obviously this Titius. Indeed, he is also very rich or rather very powerful, and very wise as well, so that his words outweigh all the words sworn by others. This God promises that our bodies will be resurrected, just as numerous as we now bear. Considering this in itself, without the promise, it is indeed not impossible, as all admit, but yet it is improbable ever to be, that the parts of a thing, scattered in thousands and thousands of places, should be gathered together again.

Hence the Socinian concludes that it is improbable even if it is taken with the promise, and the words of the promise must be interpreted otherwise, indeed forcibly, metaphorically, figuratively; on the contrary, the Catholic concludes that, taken with

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text nothing except what is probable can be gathered) but improbable (N.B., although not impossible, for we certainly do not concede this to the Socinians and the Reformed) according to reason; then it is asked, whether it is better to side with reason or the words of the text.”

<sup>53</sup> A VI, 1, 553. For a fuller discussion of the *Commentatiuncula De Iudice controversiarum* (including this passage) see my *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, pp. 50-59 and 201-209.

the words of the promise, and adding the circumstances of the person speaking, it is probable and to be kept in practice, that God wants his words both to be understood in the proper sense and thus put into execution; and as he can he will do.<sup>54</sup>

I would like to draw attention to the penultimate statement that “it is probable and to be kept in practice” since in it surfaces the strong pragmatic component of Leibniz’s theological thought. It is clear that we are in the sphere of *verum putare* (holding something as true), based on reasons for credibility, and not in the sphere of demonstration.<sup>55</sup> To borrow an expression from a much later text, the *evidentia* is not *in rebus* but *in personis*.<sup>56</sup> That is to say, the grounds of probability that what has been promised will actually happen are not intrinsic but extrinsic: they are to be found in the authority, trustworthiness, and so on, of the person who has promised and not in the nature of what has been promised. All this considered, *in practice* one should stick to what is safer. (In this specific case, it is safer to hold the resurrection of bodies as true, given the biblical and traditional pedigree of this doctrine, and to act in consequence).

Notwithstanding Leibniz’s robust theoretical engagement with highly abstract doctrines of revealed theology, this engagement appears to have been significantly driven by prudential considerations. Although it is debatable whether Scripture on its own provides a sufficient basis for the doctrine of the Trinity, the fact that a long and authoritative ecclesiastical tradition, as well as the three main Christian denominations, support this doctrine provided for Leibniz a decisive reason for holding on to it as the *safest course of action* as long as there is no proven absurdity.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> A VI, 1, 553-554.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. § 20 of the *Commentatiuncula* (A VI, 1, 550): “Fides est credere. Credere est verum putare.”

<sup>56</sup> *Annotatiunculae Subitaneae ad Tolandi Librum De Christianismo Mysteriis Carente* (8 August 1701); Dutens V, 146: even in human affairs we do not always need *evidence in Things* ..., provided it exists *in persons*, so that it is made sure by trust in them”. I discuss this text in “Natural and Supernatural Mysteries: Leibniz’s *Annotatiunculae subitaneae* on Toland’s *Christianity not Mysteriorious*”, in: Winfried Schröder (ed.), *Gestalten des Deismus in Europa*, Wiesbaden 2013, pp. 29-40.

<sup>57</sup> Leibniz acknowledged, on the one hand, that without recourse to tradition the doctrine of the Trinity could at best be regarded as probable according to the text (A VI, 1, 552–553

This pragmatism is apparent also in Leibniz's later texts. One should consider not only what is intrinsically most probable but also what is safest: "Indeed I confess that we should regularly follow appearances, and hold them as truths; but since often many things appear contrary to one another, the rule necessarily is left aside, and one must try to discover which greater likelihood then is to be followed. In this we should not consider so much which opinion [sententia] is more probable, but also which is safer."<sup>58</sup>

"There are Dogmas", Leibniz pointed out, "that have been accepted in the Church for so many centuries, especially as regards the Trinity and the incarnation, that if they were false, they would be very dangerous, nor yet can they be evinced sufficiently from the holy books".<sup>59</sup> Contrary to the supporters of the doctrine of fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith briefly mentioned above, according to Leibniz, key issues relating to the nature of God or the attribution of divine status could not be regarded as secondary doctrinal points to be safely left as "adiaphora" or indifferent matters because not contained *in terminis* in Scripture. When neither the text nor reason can adjudicate these matters with sufficient certainty, one should do what is safer, namely, accept the ecclesiastical tradition:

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quoted above). On the other hand, in his view, the doctrine of the Trinity was overwhelmingly supported by the ecclesiastical tradition (see *Defensio Trinitatis*, spring 1669\* (A VI, 1, 530): "sententiam Orbi Christiano tot seculis receptam"). See *De Scriptura, Ecclesia, Trinitate*, 1680–1684\* (A VI, 4, 2288–2289; VE, 433): "I am afraid that we cannot satisfactorily evince the Holy Trinity from scriptures, without invoking the tradition, yet it is given much more clearly by joining Scripture with tradition. It is nonetheless certain that the Holy Scripture is much more in favor of the Trinity and is sometimes violently twisted by the Antitrinitarians"; Leibniz to Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels, 4/14 August 1683 (A I, 3, 318): "It is true, as V. A. remarks, together with many able Controversialists, that it is difficult to refute the Socinians with only the passages of the Holy Scripture. . . . As for the rest, the replies of the Socinians to certain passages of the Holy Scripture, especially to the beginning of the Gospel of St. John, seem to me forced"; A VI, 4, 2292–2293: "The Antitrinitarians . . . are compelled to force the words of the holy Scripture by a very constrained interpretation, and to stray from the old traditions of the Church".

<sup>58</sup> *Annotatiunculæ Subitaneæ*; Dutens V, 145. See also Leibniz to Lorenz Hertel, cited below in footnote 79.

<sup>59</sup> *Positiones*, autumn 1685–February 1686\* (A VI, 4, 2352).

Anyhow, some think the Holy Trinity is a slight question, and whether the Christ we adore is an omnipotent and eternal GOD, or a mere man surrounded with the great glory of GOD, and yet the doubting of indifferent matters must be put forth also for this very controversy, where once it derived from the canon of the Church. Certainly it is most unsafe to waver and to play the sceptic in affairs of salvation, where every danger is to be held great for the very magnitude of the thing which we put in peril. Therefore, as far as I can see, one thing remains: after vain agitations of the soul, I think refuge should be sought in all matters in the haven of the Church, in which alone true tranquillity is to be had, when we are not safely indifferent, nor do we hope for security from a private examination after so many infelicitous examples in such difficulty of judging.<sup>60</sup>

Leibniz supported this stand with further considerations of a prudential flavour: divine providence would not permit the infiltration into the church of such errors as could compromise the salvation of those same human beings for whose redemption God chose to suffer and die on the cross.<sup>61</sup>

### Soteriology

In other words, in cases in which something of great importance is at stake, such as eternal salvation, the *rational* course of action is to go with the safer rather than with the (intrinsically) probable. This view is perfectly in tune with Leibniz's soteriology. As we read in the early *Commentatiuncula de Judice Controversiarum*, for the aim of salvation, a confused and disjunctive understanding of the meaning of believed doctrines suffices. Moreover, even if one were to believe objectively erroneous doctrines, salvation does not ultimately depend on believing what is objectively true but on a practical attitude: the sincere love of God above all things.

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<sup>60</sup> *De Schismate*, second half of 1683; A IV, 3, 236–237.

<sup>61</sup> See *Positiones* (A VI, 4, 2352); *De Unitate Ecclesiae* (A IV, 3, 220–221); Leibniz to Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels (4/14 August 1683; A I, 3, 318); Leibniz's annotations of 1691 to his copy of the fourth part of Paul Pellisson-Fontanier's *Reflexions sur les différends de la religion* (A I, 6, 142).



Leibniz was in fact deeply committed to a ‘theology of love’ in which “the love of God above all things ... is ... the principle of true religion”.<sup>62</sup> Once again, this is a theology which is ultimately practical. According to Leibniz, it would be against God’s justice and love to condemn people who sincerely search for the truth and strive toward a morally good life even if objectively in error.<sup>63</sup> As he remarked in 1690:

Mr Arnauld ... finds it strange that so many millions of pagans have not been condemned; I would find it much stranger if they had been: I don’t know why we are so inclined to believe that people are damned or sunk in eternal miseries, even if they could not help it; but this leads to thoughts hardly compatible with the goodness and justice of God ... I don’t believe that the opinion of the eternal damnation of so many virtually innocent people is so edifying and so useful in preventing sin as is imagined. It leads to thoughts hardly compatible with the love of God.<sup>64</sup>

From very early on Leibniz maintained, in fact, that to be in error (that is, to believe something false) is to be sharply distinguished from acting against conscience. Since “*the penalty for one who is mistaken is to be taught*” and “it is only the bad will, and not the error ... that can be punished”,<sup>65</sup> to be in error cannot be taken as a ground of condemnation. It is

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<sup>62</sup> Grua 161; on Leibniz’s commitment to a theology of love see Adams, “Leibniz’s Examination of the Christian Religion,” pp. 526–36.

<sup>63</sup> See my “Leibniz’s doctrine of toleration”, from which I am drawing in this section.

<sup>64</sup> A I, 6, 107-8. It should be noted that Leibniz seems to have, if not embraced, at least not denied the doctrine of eternal damnation precisely for pragmatic reasons, that is, due to its ecclesiastical tradition and its possible contribution to preventing people from sinning (see Adams, “Justice, Happiness, and Perfection in Leibniz’s City of God”, esp. pp. 216-217). In any case, the emphasis in the passage quoted above is on the *innocence* of the people concerned. In this case, Leibniz seems to have no doubt that their eternal damnation should be rejected as against the love, goodness, and justice of God.

<sup>65</sup> *Lettre de Monsieur de Leibniz à l’auteur des Reflexions sur l’origine du Mahometisme*, 2 December 1706 (Dutens V, p. 483).

only acting against conscience which should be punished.<sup>66</sup> In a letter responding to his strictly Lutheran half-brother, the twenty-three year old Leibniz wrote:

To err against conscience [Errare contra conscientiam] implies contradiction. In fact, from the beginning of the world, nobody has erred against conscience. Someone errs who believes as true that which is false [Errat qui putat verum esse quod falsum est]. Whoever believes, this person is not otherwise convinced; whoever is not otherwise convinced, does not know better; who does not know better, does not feel against conscience. Or, in short, the contradiction could be shown as follows: to err against conscience is to err knowing the very thing in which one is in error. To err knowing the very thing in which one is in error is to err in the very thing in which one is not in error. In fact, who knows, to the extent in which he knows, does not err. Therefore, if someone errs against conscience, two contradictory things – to err and not to err – belong to him in the same respect, which is absurd. We can act against conscience but we cannot believe [sentire non possumus] against conscience. So you see that, if only those who err against conscience are to be damned, nobody is to be damned for his error.<sup>67</sup>

“Nor,” Leibniz clarified in the *Nouveaux Essais*,

are those who accord salvation to pagans, or to others who lack the ordinary aids, thereby obliged to rely for this on natural processes alone ... One can, after all, maintain that, when God gives them grace sufficient to call forth an act of contrition, he also gives them before their death, even if only in the final moments, all the light of

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<sup>66</sup> See Leibniz to Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels, 4/14 August 1683; A, II, 1, p. 535 “it is against natural right [droit naturelle] to punish someone because he is of some opinion, no matter which, as opposed to punishing someone for some actions; *for the penalty for one who is mistaken is to be taught* [nam errantis poena est doceri]. And again, I do not believe that we have the right to punish someone with corporal pains for actions which he undertakes in accordance with his opinion, and which he believes his conscience obligates him to perform”.

<sup>67</sup> Leibniz to Johann Friedrich Leibniz, 5 October\* 1669, in: Paul Schrecker (ed.), “G.-W. Leibniz. Lettres et fragments inédits” *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger* 118 (1934): 5–134 (here pp. 68-69).

faith and all the fervour of love which they need for salvation; this being given to them either explicitly or dispositionally, but in any case supernaturally. ... Let me add that none of this gives this doctrine anything in common with the special views of the Pelagians and Semipelagians ... Contrary to the Pelagians, all three of the accepted religions ... agree in teaching that there is a supernatural grace in all who possess faith.<sup>68</sup>

For faith in the full sense of the term – that is, divine faith as opposed to a merely human faith based on explicable “rational grounds for beliefs”<sup>69</sup> – a supernatural light and “fervor of love” is necessary which can only be given by God’s grace. Precisely because these are “inexplicable reasons” which “consist only in our conscience or perception”, “those who base themselves on this light, cannot demand another examination from others who base themselves on a contrary light than the examination of one’s own individual conscience; namely whether one says the truth and really feels the light of which he boasts.”<sup>70</sup> The last instance of judgement regarding the salvation of any individual can therefore only be the sincerity of his or her conscience, no matter how objectively erroneous his or her beliefs may be.<sup>71</sup>

“People are not excommunicated for their error,” Leibniz wrote in 1691, “but for their obstinacy or bad disposition of heart. One can be of bad faith and obstinate even if he asserts the truth, that is to say when this is maintained without foundation on the basis of a bad principle.”<sup>72</sup> According to Leibniz, someone who embraces in bad conscience (“*malo animo*”) a true doctrine can in fact be considered as a formal heretic. Unlike a material heretic (that is, someone who in good conscience believes a false doctrine), he is therefore worthy of

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<sup>68</sup> *Nouveaux essais*, IV.xviii.9; trans. by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge 1996, p. 502). This position is already found in earlier texts. See *Dialogue entre Poliandre and Theophile*, mid-1679\* (A VI, 4, 2220-2221).

<sup>69</sup> *Nouveaux essais*, IV.xviii.9; trans. by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge 1996, p. 497). See also A, I, 6, 76.

<sup>70</sup> Leibniz to Duchess Sophie for Paul Pellisson-Fontanier, early August\* 1690; A, I, 6, 76.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Leibniz’s marginal note on his copy of the fourth part of Pellisson’s *Reflexions* (A, I, 6, p. 94).

<sup>72</sup> A I, 6, p. 141.

punishment although he did not err.<sup>73</sup> In sum, it is the subjective sincerity or insincerity of conscience (together with God's grace) which is, ultimately, the ground of salvation or condemnation.<sup>74</sup> Yet, since we cannot enter into the conscience of other people, only God can know who is saved or condemned.

Moreover, Leibniz claimed that for the salvation of an individual "no revealed article is absolutely necessary, and therefore *it is possible to be saved* in every Religion, *provided that one truly loves God above all things*".<sup>75</sup> In the earlier *Dialogue entre Poliandre and Theophile*, written in the mid-1679, he had already maintained that "those who love God above all things are in a condition [en estat] to be saved", and in the *Propositiones Theologicae* of 1685 – 1686 he had added: "No one can be justified without a true love of God".<sup>76</sup> It should be noted that the "love of God above all things" is not, for Leibniz, a super-fundamental article of faith which on its own could be sufficient for salvation. As we have seen, Leibniz explicitly distanced himself from the doctrine of fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith.<sup>77</sup> In the passages quoted above, he is not proposing some sort of 'single necessary and sufficient article of faith', on which alone salvation depends. Instead he is reiterating that salvation, ultimately, does not rest on the correctness of one's beliefs but on a practical attitude, namely, a sincere love of God.

In some cases, Leibniz argued, a heterodox theology could positively enhance the moral stand of a person, and abstaining from intervention is definitely advisable when

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<sup>73</sup> *De Haeresi formali et materiali*, 1695\*; A IV, 6, 337. On the distinction between formal and material heretics see "Leibniz's doctrine of toleration", pp. 151-152 and Antognazza, "Leibniz and Religious Toleration", pp. 612-613.

<sup>74</sup> In support of this thesis Leibniz quotes the sentence, "facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam." See Leibniz's marginal note on his copy of the fourth part of Pellisson's *Reflexions* (A I, 6, p. 144) and *Theodicy*, § 95 (GP, VI, 155). As we saw above in the *Mémoire pour des Personnes éclairées*, according to Leibniz, "God never refuses his grace to those who seek it with a good heart" (trans. by Riley in Leibniz, *Political Writings*, p. 105).

<sup>75</sup> A I, 6, 78-79. Cf. also Leibniz's marginal note on his copy of the fourth part of Pellisson's *Reflexions* (A I, 6, 101). These are texts of 1690-1691 written in the context of his epistolary exchange with the Catholic convert, Paul Pellisson-Fontanier.

<sup>76</sup> Respectively A VI, 4, 2220 and A VI, 4, 2355. Trans. by Adams, "Justice, Happiness, and Perfection in Leibniz's City of God", p. 205.

<sup>77</sup> I discuss this point in detail in "Leibniz and Religious Toleration," pp. 605-612.

incorrect beliefs have a good practical effect. A telling example is Leibniz's attitude toward Baron Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont. While distancing himself from dubious elements of van Helmont's thought,<sup>78</sup> Leibniz appreciated the baron's commitment to the common good which inspired a number of practical schemes for the improvement of the human condition. As Leibniz wrote on 20 December 1696 to Andreas Morell, "the touchstone of true illumination is a great eagerness for contributing to the general good." This was, in his view, what crucially distinguished van Helmont from other millenarians and promoters of controversial religious movements. "Among those who had extraordinary ideas," Leibniz concluded, "I have hardly found anyone beside van Helmont who shared this great principle of charity with me and who had a true eagerness for the general good, although in other respects we often had very different opinions about different matters."<sup>79</sup> Despite its shaky support and its contrariety to ecclesiastical tradition, van Helmont's radically optimistic eschatology, expecting a future millennium and a final restoration of all things, played an important role in inspiring his love of God and his commitment to the common good.<sup>80</sup> Leibniz acknowledged and admired this aspect of van Helmont's thought notwithstanding his disagreement with many of the baron's "extraordinary ideas."

#### Conclusion: theory and praxis in Leibniz's theology

In theoretically uncertain matters with a bearing on salvation and, therefore, on eternal happiness, the criterion to follow was, for Leibniz, a prudential one. In such matters devoid of absolute (as opposed to moral) certainty, the most reasonable course of action is *to do* what is *safer* even when such action relies on what is intrinsically improbable from a strictly rational point of view. In a way, this is analogous to advising drivers to fasten their seat belt even when it is very improbable that an accident will happen. This course of action applies also to doctrinal (and hence theoretical) issues. According to Leibniz, when eternal life can be at

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<sup>78</sup> See for instance Leibniz's entries in his *Tagesbuch* of August 1696, in: G. W. Leibniz, *Gesammelte werke*, Georg Heinrich Pertz (ed.), 4 vols., Hanover 1843-1847, reprint: Hildesheim 1966, vol. I, 4, p. 193, p. 198.

<sup>79</sup> A I, 13, 399-400. Trans. by Howard Hotson in "Leibniz and millenarianism", in: *Alsted and Leibniz on God, the Magistrate and the Millennium*, Texts edited with introduction and commentary by Maria Rosa Antognazza and Howard Hotson, Wiesbaden 1999, pp. 187-188.

<sup>80</sup> See Hotson, "Leibniz and millenarianism", p. 189, p. 192.

stake, the safest thing is to hold on (that is, act on, endorse, accept, subscribe) to doctrines which can claim a long ecclesiastical tradition in the main Christian denominations,<sup>81</sup> at least as long as they can be cleared from charges of absurdity.

Holding on to traditional doctrines of revealed theology had for Leibniz also a further practical end, namely, fostering the stability of a political and social order in which Christian theology was inextricably interwoven in the complex religious, political, social, and cultural fabric which made up Europe. His remarkable theoretical engagement with the fine points of highly complex and abstract theological positions was both aimed at ecclesiastical reunification and political pacification, and at ensuring that traditional doctrines met criteria of possibility (without which they could no longer be held as true). From what has been said above, however, I hope that it has now become clear that this theological pragmatism was no mere *Kirchenpolitik*. Rather, it was remarkably -- perhaps even surprisingly -- close to the family of prudential approaches to religious belief proposed by Pascal and later authors such as William James.

In any case, ultimately salvation did not depend for Leibniz on believing a set of objectively true doctrines (such as, for him, at least some of the key doctrines of the Christian revelation) but on a practical attitude: the love of God above all things. Such love is not different from seeking the common good and achieving happiness. Having an appropriate theoretical understanding of God and his creation is undoubtedly for Leibniz the high road leading to this love. But it is not the only road and what ultimately matters is to reach the final destination. The core of Leibniz's theology, as a theology of love, is ultimately concerned with what to do rather than what to know.

This is in line, I think, with the practical inspiration of Leibniz's intellectual programme as a whole. Leibniz was a man who more than anything else wanted *to do* certain things. Even the most theoretical reflections on logic, mathematics, metaphysics, physics, and ethics were, ultimately, *ad usum vitae* (in the service of life) and aimed at the happiness of humankind. With this backdrop in place, it should come as no surprise that the highly sophisticated intellectual approach adopted by Leibniz in discussions of controversial theological issues, and his unrelenting theoretical defence of traditional doctrines, is

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<sup>81</sup> Leibniz to Lorenz Hertel, January 1695 (A I 11, 21): "it is safer not to advance opinions which are not soundly established and can be harmful since they are capable of keeping sinners in their security" (trans. by Adams, "Justice, Happiness, and Perfection in Leibniz's City of God", pp. 216-217).

combined with a highly pragmatic approach to theological belief. His theology was ultimately driven by soteriological considerations and was therefore conceived as in the service of life – in this case, *eternal* life.

At the same time, this practical end should not be regarded as in competition with theoretical inquiries. Although Leibniz's intellectual programme did have, ultimately, a practical end, this end is chiefly pursued by Leibniz through intellectual means, namely through theoretical advances in a variety of fields. Not only Leibniz's personal gifts seem to have laid more on the 'theory' than on the 'praxis' side of the Berlin Society motto.<sup>82</sup> More importantly, he saw the development of all the sciences as the principal mean to pursue the end of human happiness and, at the same time, to celebrate the glory of God in his creation. In Leibniz's intellectual project as a whole, this accounts for the pivotal role played by theoretical inquiries.

The same approach is reflected in Leibniz's theoretical engagement with theology and his commitment to a robust Christian dogmatic which is rationally defensible. Knowing God and believing true doctrines is the *safest* road to salvation or eternal happiness. The aim of the journey, however, is practical. It consists in an eternal happiness which, ultimately, depends on love. *Caritas* is indeed the highest virtue in Leibniz's theology.<sup>83</sup> This may sound somewhat more in tune with Paul's Hymn to Charity than with Luther's emphasis on faith. It is in any case well attuned with the Christian tradition which assigns pre-eminent place to charity amongst the three theological virtues, and indeed amongst all virtues. Leibniz's view of theology as ultimately practical was far from unprecedented or unorthodox or of dubious theological pedigree. Amongst predecessors, Leibniz could count theologians of the stature of St Bonaventure who regarded the principal end of theology as our becoming good and our being moved to love God.<sup>84</sup> In conclusion, Leibniz's theological pragmatism, apparent

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<sup>82</sup> Cf. the motto *Theoria cum Praxi* chosen by Leibniz for the Society of Sciences of Berlin as its regulative ideal.

<sup>83</sup> As is well known, the "charity of the wise" as Leibniz's definition of justice also takes central stage in Leibniz's moral philosophy.

<sup>84</sup> As noted by R. M. Adams, Leibniz follows Bonaventure rather than Thomas Aquinas in regarding theology as primarily a practical science, since its principal end is our becoming good and moved to love God. St Bonaventure, *In primum librum sententiarum*, Prooemium, qu. 3, in: Bonaventure, *Opera Omnia*, Quaracchi 1882, vol. I, pp. 12-14. Cited by Adams in "Justice, Happiness, and Perfection in Leibniz's City of God", p. 215.

especially in his attitude toward revealed theology, should not be regarded as merely secular and political but as grounded in a practical orientation which was also genuinely and fundamentally theological.